

SNIE 10-11-65

Probable Communist Reactions to
a US Course of Action

22 September 1965

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

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SNIE 10-11-65

PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO A US COURSE OF ACTION

[Redacted]

NOTE: This is the estimate

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf
22 September 1965

~~TOP SECRET~~
[Redacted]

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TS# 185884

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

22 September 1965

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-11-65: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO A US
COURSE OF ACTION

THE PROBLEM^{1/}

To estimate probable Communist reactions to a US program of air attacks on certain new targets in North Vietnam.

ASSUMPTIONS

For the purposes of this estimate we assume air strikes against Phuc Yen and four other airfields near Hanoi and Haiphong; against rail and highway routes and traffic between Hanoi and Haiphong and between Hanoi-Haiphong and China; against four major thermal power plants; and against SAM installations defending these areas. We further assume that attacks on all these targets are begun within the next few weeks

^{1/} The Director of INR, Department of State, dissents from this entire estimate. His reasons are set forth at the end of the estimate.

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Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification~~

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and in a roughly simultaneous fashion. We also assume restrikes as necessary and subsequent armed reconnaissance against the rail and highway targets.

THE ESTIMATE

1. For many months our estimates have emphasized the crucial importance of the fact that the Communists, especially the DRV and China, believed they were winning the war in South Vietnam and needed only to maintain their momentum until the GVN collapsed and the US was forced to abandon the struggle. In this confidence Hanoi has been willing to endure bombings of the DRV, to accept the increasing US commitment, and to refuse any negotiations. Moreover, the Communists have counted on international and domestic pressures on the US, as well as on the growing capabilities of air defense around the critical Hanoi-Haiphong area, to deter further escalation. Finally, they probably have had strong doubts about US determination to face a protracted war, and these feelings have probably been strengthened by repeated US soundings and overtures for negotiations.

2. We think, however, that recently this general confidence has been weakened both by US/GVN military successes and by tangible evidence that the US is willing to increase its commitment. The situation has

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come to seem more dangerous and discouraging than they probably had expected, and victory must seem to them much further off than it did a few months ago. Thus, we think that the assumed US action would come at a time when DRV doubts may be growing.

3. Public Communist declarations and commitments to continue the struggle, however, remain as firm as ever. Recently, the DRV has once again vigorously rejected negotiations on any terms except its own, apparently in response to approaches from various intermediaries. The Chinese have been vehement in denouncing negotiations altogether; they have even warned the DRV more or less openly against them. Their warnings may indicate Chinese worry that the DRV is weakening; indeed, there are a few indications, private and tentative, that Hanoi may not be quite as adamant in its position as its public declarations assert.

Immediate Reactions

4. The Communists, while they have hoped that the US would continue to exempt the Hanoi-Haiphong area from attack, probably have rated as fairly high the chances of the kind of US attacks assumed here. Their reactions, therefore, would probably not be greatly affected by shock or surprise.

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5. The North Vietnamese would, of course, defend as best they could against the attacks. Beyond this, they might retaliate quickly. It is possible that the DRV has contingency plans for surviving aircraft to attack American bases in the South or US carriers. There is no evidence of training for this type of mission. They would probably expect such strikes to provoke wider and heavier US attacks. Thus, we think that the chances would be against such retaliation, though it cannot be ruled out.

6. A second immediate danger would be Chinese air intervention -- either over the DRV or against South Vietnam or US carriers. It is possible that Hanoi and Peking already have an agreed plan for the Chinese to intervene from their own bases in response to the kind of US attack assumed in this estimate. We doubt this; the Chinese are not likely to have made a firm or unqualified commitment. They would wish to weigh the effectiveness of the initial US attack and to receive the DRV reaction before making any move likely to invite a US attack on South China. However, the danger of accidental encounters would be particularly high if US aircraft were operating close to the border.

7. Thus in the first few days, during and immediately following the onset of the US attacks, there would be a chance of an attack on US bases or ships and a chance of Chinese air intervention. But we think these unlikely.

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8. Of course, there would also be a great hue and cry from the Communist side, and the usual stream of protests, threats and warnings. We would also expect new acts of terrorism and sabotage inside South Vietnam, particularly against US forces. Viet Cong capabilities in these fields are considerably greater than they have yet chosen to demonstrate. The principal Communist reactions however, would come in later weeks and months, and they would of necessity be greatly affected by the ongoing course of military and political events as well as by the US actions we consider in this estimate.

Subsequent Reactions

9. China. The Chinese would strongly urge the DRV to continue the fight; to this end they would probably promise more equipment and personnel to build up air defenses, and particularly to defend and repair the interdicted lines of communication to South China. The Chinese might agree to send their own aircraft and pilots to the DRV, but on balance we think this unlikely in the wake of the demonstrated vulnerability of DRV airfields.^{2/} Almost certainly the Chinese would oppose negotiating, and they might warn the DRV not to count on Chinese support if it moved toward a cease-fire or a diplomatic settlement. We think Chinese views carry great weight in Hanoi, particularly if the DRV leaders were divided over future policy.

^{2/} The Director, NSA, for the National Security Agency, considers the chances of the Chinese sending their own aircraft and pilots to the DRV despite the demonstrated vulnerability of its airfields as being about even.

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10. It may be that these US attacks would tip the balance and cause Chinese intervention. The Chinese might believe that the war had passed the point of no return and that a US-Chinese confrontation was the inevitable price of continuing the war in South Vietnam. The Chinese have made this war the test case for their doctrine of "peoples war" against the US; they have staked much prestige on it. We cannot be very confident that the Chinese would continue to refrain from intervening in the air from their own bases as the US continued attacks near the Chinese border and against a weakened DRV. But on balance we think it unlikely that they would so intervene.^{3/} With somewhat more confidence, we estimate that the US attacks would not provoke large-scale Chinese intervention with ground combat forces; Peking would almost certainly believe that this would run very high risks of war with the US.

11. The USSR. The Soviets would increase their efforts to halt the conflict. They would put pressure on the US and urge negotiations on Hanoi. There are some recent indications that the Soviets are now more willing to put some pressure on the DRV, perhaps because they believe their military assistance and the trend of the guerrilla war gives their view greater authority. The Soviets would almost certainly agree to DRV

^{3/} The Director, NSA, National Security Agency, considers the chances that the Chinese will intervene in the air from their own bases as the US continues attacks near the Chinese border as being about even.

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requests to replace air defense equipment, although they would do so more to retain their influence with the DRV than in the expectation that they could furnish an adequate defense against US operations.

12. The Soviets could try to relieve pressures on the DRV by moving against the US in Berlin. We continue to believe there are strong inhibitions against a double crisis. Carefully controlled harassments and occasionally provocative demonstrations of US vulnerabilities are always possible, however. A potentially unstable situation in the Soviet leadership adds an element of uncertainty to the Soviet positions.

13. The DRV. In Hanoi, reactions would probably develop along one of two conflicting lines:

(a) Hanoi might believe that the new US attacks and the subsequent interdiction campaign did not alter the basic situation. The North Vietnamese might stick to their belief that the guerrilla war is, by definition, a prolonged struggle against heavy odds, that there will be setbacks and defeats, but that the ultimate gain is worth it. They might feel that damping down the war in the wake of US attacks would appear as capitulation. They might feel that if the war were interrupted the Viet Cong movement could not long maintain its morale and cohesion. Along this line of reasoning they might also conclude that the US escalation

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of bombings would still not do intolerable damage and would probably not be extended to attacks on urban population. They might decide that the US was desperate in the face of a long war involving US troops in the South, and that further struggle, perhaps involving the dispatch of PAVN units to the South on an increased scale, was the best course to crack the Saigon Government and US resolve.

(b) On the other hand, the DRV might estimate the situation quite differently. The growing US commitment in the South might persuade them that the guerrilla war could not be prosecuted to final victory. Without such a promise of ultimate success they might believe Viet Cong morale could not be sustained. Moreover, the attacks on the DRV's air defenses and on a wider range of targets might convince them that the US intended to escalate the air war almost indefinitely, if necessary. Thus they might decide that, while their position in the South was still strong and the Viet Cong still intact, it would be more expedient to move toward negotiations or some tacit understanding in order to pursue their objectives through political means, and possibly at some future time to resume guerrilla warfare.

14. We believe that the US course of action assumed here would reinforce the thinking described in subparagraph (b) above. Even so, it is not likely that the North Vietnamese would move immediately to

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the conference table; they would probably feel that there was still time to test the effectiveness of the Viet Cong against US forces. They might still hope to strike a critical blow against US and GVN morale, perhaps by engaging US forces somewhere in the hinterland. Failing this, they might next revert to hit and run tactics for a time. And there is still the question of whether China could prevent a switch to political tactics.

15. In general, however, we think it unlikely that in the new situation created by the US attacks assumed here, the DRV would simply continue the war along present lines. We think that this US course of action would be more likely in time to move the North Vietnamese toward political and diplomatic initiatives than to cause them to escalate the war

16. The Viet Cong. As noted above, Viet Cong morale is an important ingredient in DRV estimates of how to prosecute the war. We have little good evidence on the state of Viet Cong morale. And it is difficult to judge the impact of specific US moves, since their effectiveness is a gradual cumulative process. In the assumed instance, the new US air attacks on the DRV would be unlikely to affect Viet Cong capabilities or intentions in the short run. Over the longer term, however, if it became apparent that supply and reinforcement were more and more difficult, it is likely that VC morale would deteriorate, particularly if they suffered setbacks on the order of Chu Lai together with continuing pressure on the ground and from the air.

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17. Other Considerations. A current factor which might play some role is the Indo-Pakistani conflict. The Communists might see the new US move in Vietnam as an attempt to take advantage of the diversion of world attention to the Indian subcontinent. The US attack might help to dissuade the Chinese from any major involvement there. Peking would almost certainly be increasingly reluctant to divert resources to support Pakistan in the face of new escalation in Vietnam, its primary area of concern. In general, however, we think that the course of the Indo-Pakistani conflict would not greatly affect Communist reactions to the US course of action considered in this estimate.

The following is the position of the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State:

1. The Director, INR, Department of State, dissents fundamentally from the key estimates made above. He believes that the postulated air strikes against the DRV's SAM sites, airfields, thermal plants, and prime rail, road, and traffic targets would be seen by the Communists -- as well as by most other observers -- as marking a fundamental change in the character of our escalation of the Vietnam war. Separated strikes on these targets, carefully spaced over time, would help reduce adverse reactions, although these would be serious in any event. The composite

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program assumed here, however, would be regarded as a political and military watershed comparable to that of last February when our bombing of the DRV began.

2. Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow would all view the strikes as initiating -- and in large part executing -- the highest level of militarily significant escalation available in the DRV short of ground invasion. Even assuming precision bombing, the strikes would inextricably involve industrial and civilian losses beyond the objectives deliberately targeted, as well as almost certain Soviet and Chinese casualties. In operation the new program would appear to have exempted only deliberate attacks (of no military significance) on the population itself. Communists and non-Communists alike would consider that this sudden massive action contradicted the many prior official indications, public and private, that we intended to respect the special sensitivity of the Hanoi-Haiphong complex. They would regard these undifferentiated and simultaneous strikes as a gross departure from our past policy of graduated pressure. They would probably conclude that we had decided to forsake further efforts to project a judicious combination of political-military pressures against the infiltration network, and had chosen instead the blunt instrument of a broad military assault on the chief elements of the DRV economy and its self-defense capability. The credibility of our protestations of limited objectives would slump, and our actions would just as plausibly be seen to invite

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the capitulation of the DRV under pain of total destruction, raise the specter of an eventual invasion on the ground, and in any case appear to threaten the DRV's ability to survive.

3. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that Hanoi would choose to move toward negotiations or compromise; it is unlikely that Moscow could afford or would be willing to urge Hanoi to do so; and it is certain that Peking would press Hanoi to persevere. These positions would be mutually reinforcing.

4. The DRV leaders, as the estimate notes, have recently indicated that their terms for negotiation may not be as inflexible as they have sometimes seemed. The assumed attacks, however, would immediately deter Hanoi from any diplomatic overtures it may possibly have been contemplating. It would fear that any sign of compromise under such pressure would be read by friends and enemies as capitulation, would undermine all possible future bargaining positions, would irreparably damage Viet Cong morale, and would predispose the US to renew these pressures at any time and under any conditions it thought appropriate. Whatever hesitations the DRV may have had would now be resolved in favor of militant prosecution of the war and of more insistent requests for, and far fewer qualms over, Chinese and Soviet aid.

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5. Far from seeking a respite from the bombings, the DRV would attempt to retaliate by raising the tempo of the ground war. It would send additional ground forces to Laos and South Vietnam as rapidly as the infiltration routes permit. It probably would surface these efforts, at least to the extent of acknowledging the despatch of "regrouped southerners" and "volunteers," both to raise Viet Cong morale and to discourage the US and its supporters with the prospect of a long jungle war.

6. The DRV would certainly at once press Peking and Moscow vigorously for prompt aid in rebuilding its defenses against air attacks. Inhibitions about additional Soviet and Chinese presence in the DRV would diminish. Hanoi might well drop whatever reservations it may have had against the use of Soviet or Chinese pilots. It would be most impatient with Sino-Soviet disputes about transit rights, but would expect those past hurdles to be overcome in the new atmosphere.

7. Although Hanoi's reaction will continue to be of primary importance, the locus of decision making will shift perceptibly away from Hanoi to Peking and Moscow. Peking will have a major role in determining the overall Communist response to the assumed US actions. Given the preceding estimate of Hanoi's response, these reactions will be consistent. Hence the frustrating dilemma of the main estimate probably will not arise -- Hanoi's switching to a negotiatory track despite giving China's contrary views "great weight." (Compare paragraphs 9 and 15 of the SNIE).

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8. It is almost certain that Hanoi and Peking have concerted their preparations and discussed plans for Chinese action in the event of US attacks such as the ones assumed here. The Chinese would strongly urge Hanoi to reject any thought of negotiations, and they will purposefully underwrite the DRV's will to persist. They would furnish the DRV with logistic assistance in prosecuting the war in the south and in making further US air attacks as costly as possible. They would give safe haven to any DRV planes which escaped our strikes and would permit them to operate from Chinese bases. They would probably provide Chinese planes and pilots to operate from the remaining DRV facilities if and when useable.

9. The Chinese would immediately increase their defensive air patrols along their frontier and perhaps over adjacent DRV territory in which their ground forces appear to be active. The danger of accidental encounters with US planes will be high and will increase as US planes approach the border. If the DRV airfields are successfully interdicted, there is a better than even chance that Chinese air will intervene from Chinese bases.

10. The Chinese would probably in any case increase their presence on the ground in North Vietnam, furnishing anti-aircraft, engineer, and supply units and, if asked, providing combat forces to defend against a

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possible US invasion of the north, thus freeing DRV forces to go southward. With the destruction of the rail line into China, the logistical problem of supplying the DRV would increase. To the degree that the US program is successful and South China must become the operational and infrastructure base for further air defense of the DRV, the Chinese will need Soviet support and protection. Greater Soviet involvement might reluctantly be desired to deter the US. This is an additional factor likely to promote a constructive resolution of previous Sino-Soviet frictions over the speed, scope, and method of aiding Hanoi and bolstering South China bases.

11. We do not believe that the Pakistan-India war is likely to place any limitation on Peking's willingness and ability to carry out the foregoing responses. Peking has prepared its forces and its population for some time to face the eventuality of the US actions assumed in this estimate. Its likely actions against India, outlined in SNIE 13-10-65, will probably not be deterred by such US actions, nor will the Indian theater require the diversion of Chinese air or ground forces available to support North Vietnam and to defend South China.

12. Indeed in addition to the general increase in pressures generated by the interacting nature of the two Asian theaters of war, Peking would be aware of certain comparative advantages in an escalatory response to the American move in North Vietnam. Peking knows that the Vietnam theater tends to bring the US into confrontation with both China and the USSR,

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while the Indian theater tends to bring the US into confrontation only with China. Therefore Peking would hope to breach US-USSR relations on the matter of Vietnam, reducing thereby the freedom of both the USSR and the US to respond against Chinese pressures in the Subcontinent.

13. The Soviets would be specifically affronted by the assumed US course of action in Vietnam. They would almost certainly interpret it as an assault on the viability of North Vietnam, whose security they have committed themselves to defend. They would be likely to regard the US action as a direct challenge to themselves, the more so since it would probably result in Soviet casualties. They would be unlikely to place any credence in assurances that US intentions were still limited (something they have been prepared to do thus far). The sensational nature of the American initiative and the obstinacy of the Chinese and DRV reaction to it would harden the Soviet response.

14. Under these circumstances Moscow would be less likely than ever to press Hanoi to negotiate, and it would redouble its effort to participate meaningfully in the defense of the DRV. Moscow would renew its earlier offers of additional aircraft and pilots and would attempt to increase the flow of SAMs and technicians to man them. The Soviets would renew their proposals of last spring for a cooperative effort with the Chinese to aid Hanoi. The Chinese, for their part, would find it

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more difficult than previously to refuse reasonable cooperation in expediting Soviet aid, especially in view of the assumed destruction of DRV-Chinese rail lines. Despite the continuing hostility between Chinese and Soviets, their respective stakes in the struggle are likely to lead to competition to see who can help Hanoi most effectively.

15. Unfortunately for them, Soviet problems in providing rapid and effective aid would be serious. DRV airfields and associated installations would be unusable, heavily damaged, or under continuing attack. Previously prepared SAM sites would likewise be difficult to replenish, and the US would presumably not abstain from attacking sites in preparation, as it did during the installation of the present Soviet-supplied SAM capability. Under these conditions, it is likely that the Soviets would make a strong attempt to mount an air defense effort from Chinese territory and we believe that, despite haggling, some arrangement to this end would be consummated. As a bargaining factor with Moscow, Peking will probably request -- and Moscow provide -- sophisticated Soviet air defense equipment (MIG 21s and SAMs) to protect bases and logistical lines in South China.

16. We believe that fundamentally the Soviets would nevertheless remain interested in an end to the conflict. While under the stepped up military assistance effort which we believe they would be bound to make

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the Soviets would be prepared to run the risk of direct engagements with US forces in Vietnam, we believe that they would not contemplate these risks with any equanimity and would still attempt to prevent escalation from running out of control. Accordingly, even in addition to its greater military involvement, Moscow can be expected to resort to various forms of political pressures to deter the US, including a further substantial worsening in bilateral relations.

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